

Missoulian

Somers, Lakeside school cooks serve up award-winning, healthy options for kids

By VINCE DEVLIN of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, November 15, 2010 7:00 am

SOMERS — Most of the 562 students enrolled at Lakeside Elementary or Somers Middle School — sometimes 80 percent or more — shovel into their mouths whatever it is the school food service program serves up each day.

Like almost all of them, eighth-grader Craig Greenhagen has his favorites.

What he didn't know — until a reporter let the cat out of the bag last week — is that the sauce for the spaghetti he likes best is made from scratch using, among other things, squash.

"Really?" he asked. "Squash?"

Yep, food service director Robin Vogler had said earlier. "We'll put squash in every red sauce we make — for pizzas, spaghetti, sloppy joes — and sweet potatoes and yams, too, if we have them. It adds fiber and flavor, and extends the nutrition."

They'll also grind lentils into the hamburger meat they use for the spaghetti and sloppy joes, she added — and then wondered if she wasn't giving out too many secrets.

"The kids will probably read that and freak out," she said with a laugh.

Actually, the kids seem very happy with the food they get out of Vogler's kitchen.

So is the State Office of Public Instruction, which has made Somers Lakeside the latest — but still, only the seventh — school district in Montana honored for meeting the Healthier Montana Menu Challenge.

It's not that easy. There are requirements on the amounts and varieties of fruits and vegetables that must be offered, as well as strict limits to sugar, sodium, total fat, trans fat and calories from saturated fats in the menus.

The kids, naturally, seem more interested in the taste than the nutrition. Vogler gives them plenty of choices.

As soon as they've paid their \$2 — although roughly half qualify for free lunches — the students must decide which of three lines they'll head to: hot lunch, the soup and salad bar, or the daily "grab-and-go" table.

Let's say they chose the soup-and-salad bar option last Tuesday, as seventh-graders Brenna Neater and Taylor Ragland did — because on Tuesdays, they explained, it turns into a soup, fruit and salad bar

In addition to the bowls of homemade ham-and-potato soup and homemade wheat rolls, they could build a salad of lettuce, tomato, cheese, walnuts and sunflower seeds, top it with low-fat dressings such as Ranch or Italian prepared fresh daily by cook Joyce Scott, then fill the rest of their plate with yogurt, blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, grapes, cantaloupe, bananas and kiwi fruit.

The girls have a tough choice if their favorite hot lunch lands on a fruity Tuesday. Ragland says hers is the turkey and gravy with mashed potatoes, steamed veggie, fruit and a homemade desert. Neater likes Vogler's once-a-month "breakfast-for-lunch" offering of ham, French toast, apple compote, oven potatoes and juice.

If they had studying or other things to do at lunchtime last Tuesday, they could grab a turkey sandwich on rolls baked by Vogler — which came with carrots, a banana, and an oatmeal-and-coconut cookie made by head cook Robin Crosby — and go.

The grab-and-go table has a different menu each day. Greenhagen said he always gets it on Thursdays.

"It's Chinese food," he said. "and it's really good."

Eighth-grader Jayson Potter said he's a regular at the salad bar on Thursdays, when the salad comes with homemade chili in a homemade bread bowl.

On any given day, most students, however, head for the main line, where on Tuesday it was “Build Your Own Sub” day from the turkey, ham, lettuce, tomato, onion, and pepperoncini on rolls from Wheat Montana.

“It’s about the only day we put out mayonnaise,” Scott said. “The kids like it on the sandwiches, but the fat content is too high to use it too often.”

The sandwiches came with a rainbow fruit salad, homemade applesauce cake and, yes, tater tots, the one commodity food found on the day’s menu.

“You can’t run a school food program without some commodities,” Vogler said, “but we try to do everything we can from scratch.”

Not only that, they buy locally whenever possible, from Montana beef to organic lettuce, leeks, basil, and apples from Loon Lake Gardens in nearby Bigfork.

The emphasis on Montana-grown products is an important part of the program to Vogler, who says Montana farms and ranches produced 70 to 90 percent of the food Montanans consumed prior to World War II, a figure that she says now is closer to 10 percent.

Vogler is working with a peer mentoring group developing guidelines for farm-to-school food suppliers.

She’ll take donations from local gardeners she knows and trusts — “You’ve got to know where their water supply comes from,” she says — and that’s where much of the aforementioned squash originates.

For a time, Vogler knew not only the beef she was buying was from Montana, but knew the rancher who raised the cattle.

She has refused to accept commodity beef since a huge 2008 recall of beef produced by a Chino, Calif., slaughterhouse turned out to include meat in her freezer.

“I’m feeding 5-year-olds,” Vogler said. “That really upset me, the thought that food from this kitchen could have made them sick.”

She found a rancher in Dayton, and bought beef from him through White’s Wholesale Meats in Ronan.

“He knew all his calves and cows, they were all grass-fed,” Vogler said. The rancher has since sold out, and the new owner doesn’t “winter over” his cattle, but Vogler continues to buy all her beef from White’s, and from Montana when she can.

“Some of it may come from South Dakota or Nebraska now,” she says, “but the cows at least spent part of their lives in Montana, and meat processed at White’s is USDA inspected.”

A Nebraska native, Vogler came to Montana by way of Jackson Hole, Wyo. She cooked — primarily, she says, baked — for several area restaurants, including Swan River Café in Bigfork and Rocco’s in Kalispell, before going back to college to become a teacher.

“I was a student teacher, substitute and aide,” Vogler says, “and I went back to school late in life and got my teaching license.”

But when she was ready to teach five years ago, this — food service director — was the job that was open.

She took over a kitchen that for decades, she says, had mostly offered “brown-and-serve” meals. In the summers she works as a personal chef, and it’s one of her clients who donates the money that allows Vogler to do some of her school shopping at Loon Lake Gardens.

“Robin has been amazing,” superintendent Teri Wing says. “She does all the menu planning, nutrition analysis, and cooks every day. She had a vision, and changed things dramatically.”

For instance, at 10:07 a.m. each school day, classes at the middle school take a “nutrition break.” They head outside to walk laps in the school parking lot, where Vogler and her staff sell snacks from a cart — Tuesday, it was zucchini bread Vogler baked that morning, after cooking and serving breakfast.

Vogler has added wellness program coordinator to her job title, and once lunch is over, teaches an elective class in nutrition to eighth graders.

What they learn in the afternoons, they live through the breakfasts, lunches and snacks they eat earlier in the day at Somers Middle School.